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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9128
INFO RUEHZM/GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 1365
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS PRIORITY 1443
RUEHRH/AMEMBASSY RIYADH PRIORITY 6466
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 JEDDAH 000341

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/06/2016

TAGS: KDEM KWMN PGOV SA SCUL SOCI KMPI

SUBJECT: SETBACKS FOR SAUDI WOMEN CALL PERCEIVED REFORM
INTO QUESTION

REF: A. 05 JEDDAH 004941
1B. 05 JEDDAH 004949

Classified By: Consul General Tatiana C. Gfoeller for
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: Two recent setbacks to the empowerment of women demonstrate that while this policy has received official support from the highest levels of the Saudi government, such changes face significant opposition within society at large. Last week, the Pan-Arab daily "Asharq Al Awsat" reported that two women candidates for the Medina Chamber of Commerce withdrew their nominations in the face of intense social pressure. A day later, a prominent Saudi female banker, scheduled to participant in a prestigious State Department program for business leaders, was forced to cancel her attendance when her company rescinded her leave request apparently due to fears of negative publicity. These events illustrate the precarious nature of social change in a country where reform is often from the top down and are indicative of the obstacles encountered by those who challenge the established orthodoxy. END SUMMARY

WOMEN CANDIDATES WITHDRAW FROM ELECTION

12. (C) The Pan-Arab daily "Asharq Al Awsat" reported on April 27 that the two women candidates for the Medina Chamber of Commerce withdrew their names from consideration following intense social pressure to do so. A second Saudi newspaper from the country's Western region, "Al Watan," quoted candidate Nohad Sunbol as saying that though she had received little support during her campaign, her withdrawal garnered numerous letters of appreciation. The other candidate, Wafa Tolba, remarked in Jeddah's "Okaz" newspaper that her choice to drop out of the election was due to a general "immaturity" among the voting members of the Chamber.

13. (C) Both women indicated that they had received anonymous threats and were discouraged by their families from pursuing their candidacies. This is in marked contrast to the much-publicized elections held at the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce in November, when two women, Lama Al Suleiman and Nashwa Taher, won seats (see reftels). Contacts predicted that the Medina women had been so intimidated by the backlash against their candidacies that they would be unlikely to discuss the matter with Consulate officers.

EMPLOYER DENIES PROMINENT BANKER'S ATTENDANCE AT DEPARTMENT PROGRAM

¶4. (C) A similar blow to women's empowerment occurred on April 28 when prominent Jeddah banker and SAMBA employee Soha Abdoul Farag, who had been selected by the Department to participate in the prestigious FORTUNE/State Department International Women Leaders Mentoring Partnership, was forced to cancel her attendance after her employer rescinded her previously-approved leave request. Farag was scheduled to attend a series of high-profile seminars in Washington with women leaders from academia and the USG, including the Secretary and U/S Hughes, and to participate in an intensive

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mentorship program at the Los Angeles law firm of Latham & Watkins. Farag's selection for the program had been widely-lauded in the Pan-Arab and Saudi press, with coverage in "Al Hayat," "The Saudi Gazette," "Arab News" and "Asharq Al Awsat" throughout the week of April 24.

¶5. (C) Consulate General contacts indicated that after initially approving Farag's participation, SAMBA management decided that any public link between the bank and Farag would be negative for the company which has lost deposits in the past due to its previous connection with Citigroup. (NOTE: SAMBA has never been mentioned in any press coverage of Farag's selection to date).

¶6. (C) In a May 2 meeting with the CG, Farag stated that though she suspects the decision to prevent her attendance resulted from the fear of publicity, no one in SAMBA's leadership will confirm this. When she initially received the bank's approval to attend, perhaps clairvoyantly, Farag had been quoted in "Al Hayat" on April 30 as saying that "although women have been provided with official support, women still lack the social support."

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¶7. (C) On May 3, Farag contacted the Consulate to say that SAMBA had revised its stance and would allow her to participate in the mentorship program at Latham & Watkins in the fall, though she would still be unable to interact with Washington policy makers and the other foreign participants in the FORTUNE partnership. Due to prior commitments, however, Latham & Watkins will be unable to host her at that time, so her participation has in effect been canceled.
Gfoeller